



Sermon

2<sup>nd</sup> June 2013

## ***The Prayer of Faith***

**1 Kings 17:1-16; James 5:13-20; Luke 7:1-10**

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Today I am starting a new preaching series. We have just come out of the Easter-Trinity season and reverted to ordinary time hence the green vestments. In this season, there is more freedom to depart from the lectionary for specific teaching.

Since we have in previous years preached on the Gospel and Galatians closely, I plan to take the lectionary's lead of following Elijah and Elisha for some weeks, but in more detail than the lectionary and conforming other readings to that theme.

Following this series, we will use material from the Hope Project as we start to prepare for next year.

So Elijah – where is he in Israel's history? After David's rule (1010-970), his son Solomon reigned until 930BC. While David expanded the kingdom and brought all the tribes under his rule, his son knew great prosperity and peace in his rule. During this time the first temple was built.

On Solomon's death, his successor was a harsh young king who alienated the people to the extent that he lost their loyalty and ten of the twelve tribes rebelled against him. He was left with the southern territory around Jerusalem and the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

The Northern rebel king, Jeroboam, had a problem. All the Israelites were supposed to worship in Jerusalem three times a year. If he allowed them to go to the temple, they might give their allegiance back to the true king and reject him. So he set up calf idols at Bethel and Dan and called the people to worship there instead. This, of course, was a terrible spiritual rebellion against the covenant with Yahweh. His actions broke the first two commandments: "You shall not have any gods before me. You shall not make for yourself any idol."<sup>1</sup>

56 years on with the third southern king reigning, the northern kingdom is on its eighth king, Ahab – there had been a lot of treason and rebellion in the north!

Ahab is described in the previous chapter as more evil than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam but he married Jezebel the daughter of the King of Sidon, a Phoenician city on the Mediterranean coast.<sup>2</sup> This was strictly forbidden for a Jew and especially for a Jewish King. She was a worshipper of the Canaanite god Baal. Ahab was very much under her thumb and she set about to kill all the prophets of Yahweh.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:3-4

<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings 16:30ff

Into this situation steps Elijah. You have heard the first mention of him. All we are told is that he comes from Tishbe, on the East side of the Jordan. But he comes and challenges King Ahab, declaring a judgement on the land because of the adoption of this Canaanite religion.

Because of this determined spiritual pollution of the land and the people, there will be no rain or dew except at his word.<sup>3</sup>

We are not told here the words Elijah prayed or what God had said to him. But James tells us that he prayed earnestly.

We are, however, told that God instructed Elijah where to live and how he would get his provision. "So he did what the LORD had told him." – Good action! Do we? Sometimes it is very hard to obey but we must be sure to obey when God speaks to us. We will see more of Elijah's obedience now.

Firstly he is sent to live near the Kerith Ravine on the East side of the Jordan River. A brook supplied him with water and God told him that he had ordered ravens to feed him. And so it happened with ravens providing bread and meat.

Helen has a book, "Remarkable Miracles," by G.C. Bevington who was a country preacher in the US Midwest around the beginning of the twentieth century. He gives an account of sleeping in a hollow log for want of shelter. At that time he was praying and fasting for a town. After five days in the log, he got hungry but did not believe his prayer was answered. He then found six fresh acorns in the log beyond his head, but where he knew there had not been anything before. He ate them: "Well I was never fond of acorns but, oh, they tasted so good." Next morning, there were another six fresh acorns in the same place. And so it continued three times a day. Finally, he crept out to see what was happening and saw six squirrels each deposit an acorn into a knot hole in the log. This continued three times a day for the next five days until he had the answer to his prayer. Some days later he came back and checked again, and the squirrels had not put any more into that log.<sup>4</sup>

Well as the drought takes hold after about six months, the brook dries up (verse 7) and God speaks to Elijah again sending him to the coast to a village near Sidon, Jezebel's homeland. There a widow is to feed him.

He travels across Israel to get there and as he arrives he sees a widow. He asks for food as was normal for a traveller in those cultures. How would you feel? On the right track – it's all working out. Then he learns that she has run out of food and is preparing to die – what would your response be?

He had the confidence in God's word to him, to know that provision would be made. He trusted and he obeyed what he had been told to do.

The widow's response is also amazing: In the extreme circumstance, she is prepared to offer that food. God had said to Elijah that he had commanded a widow to provide for him. Maybe she knew that consciously or unconsciously however she obeyed. And the result of their obedience was blessing and provision. The oil and the flour did not run out.

I can give you up to date examples of God's provision. I was talking recently to Arthur Reid who lives in Manly. He told me of a time when he was hosting a baptism at his former house. Their practice was to invite people back to Sunday lunch but the pastor suddenly announced that everyone was welcome at Arthur and Anna's for lunch! This was Elim in the city when it was huge. They hurried home with Anna naturally horrified at how they could cater for what could be a very large number. Arthur said, "All we can do is put out the food we have." So they served it up: 6 chickens, roast vegetables and all. It filled a 8-seater table. And the people poured in. He reckons there were 300 people there. And they all ate.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 17:1

<sup>4</sup> Bevington G.C., 1973, *Remarkable Miracles*, Logos International, Plainfield, N.J., p45ff

The Reids kept bringing food from the kitchen. They all had enough. In fact, Arthur overheard some young guys as they walked up the drive afterwards saying how much they had had to eat and how full they were. That was a miraculous provision.

We have another experience closer to home - right here in fact. When we started the building project we had a contingency fund of \$35,000. As the project went on, variations were pressed on us until I went to Ron and said, I think we have only \$10,000 left. He thought it was worse than that. We reviewed the figures and he checked accounts and announced, "No, you've got \$35,000!"

Off we went again, and as work progressed the same situation repeated. Once more after adding it up: \$35,000!

It happened a third time. Then recently, when we had a final wash up, Jon reported the amount in the building fund was \$35,000! This was the widow's supply all over again. In this case, there was no doubt a natural explanation of people giving beyond their pledges but it was wonderful to behold. Like Moses, we even had to write to some people and say you can stop giving we have enough!<sup>5</sup>

We have heard about Elijah exercising authority over the climate and having supernatural provision of food. But notice James says that Elijah was a man just like us. Get that! He was a man just like us – but God did remarkable things through him. James is saying we too can be used by God. It is not just Old Testament Superheroes.

Let's look briefly at the gospel. Some Jewish elders come to Jesus to ask him to heal a Centurion's son. They plead with him to come because the centurion is so deserving. He has been generous and good to the Jewish community. This is the wrong tack!

No one is good enough to deserve God's favour. It is all grace. The Centurion knows better, he sends messengers acknowledging he is not worthy (quite something for an occupying army NCO to say). He shows his understanding of authority structures. Someone who submits to authority can be trusted with authority. He recognises that Jesus is under the authority of God and so has the authority to heal.

Some pointers for our prayers of faith.

1. James said, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.": We are not righteous of ourselves but in Christ. He deals with our sin. So we are righteous when we are submitted to him, trusting his salvation, obeying him.
2. We don't have to justify why God should heal someone; God is already committed to heal – it is sheer grace.
3. From Jesus and the centurion: Being under authority, we have authority. Because we are under Jesus' authority – obedient then we are trusted with authority. We are to use that authority as he intends.
4. Faith is not pleading desperately - that is desperation. Faith is trust.
5. Faith is well-summed up by the old saying "Trust and obey."

Elijah trusted God and obeyed him. Jesus marvelled at the trust and the understanding of obedience which the centurion showed.

God wants to work through his people to bring about his purposes. Why did Elijah need to pray for the rain to stop when God intended that anyway? God had given him authority in the situation. "There will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word." In his economy, God was delegating authority to Elijah and Elijah had to pray in the drought. He was commanding the rain to stop in line with God's instructions.

This is the principle which makes sense of the existence of prayer. Why do we need to pray when God knows what we want and need already? The best answer I know is that he has

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<sup>5</sup> Cp Exodus 36:3-7

given authority over the earth to mankind and still respects that. It is up to us now to use that authority and restore things to their proper order.

I am not saying that everything is solved if you will just believe. But I do think there are many misconceptions about prayer and we can grow in faith. It is just trust and trust grows as we see God's faithfulness in action.

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